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HIS EXPERIMENT

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NO! said Babette. The little word snapped like a torpedo. Gray blinked down on her thoughtfully, but there was a hint of amusement in the twist of his mouth.

"No, thank you," he corrected, with gentle gravity.

Babette bit her lips in helpless, silent anger. She felt that she had appeared like a ruffled canary before whose bars he had passed a teasing finger, and her vanity was on fire, scorching her intolerably.

He had asked her, gravely and without worship, to marry him, and she, hailing a chance to be revengeful for a thousand tiny wounds, had drawn herself up like a novel heroine, with lips and eyes following the printed directions of romance, and had refused him with chilly hauteur.

Gray's glance, keen, quiet, not adoring, had shattered the soap bubble glory of the moment, and reduced her from a queen of fiction to a petulant little girl caught in the act of posing. He could have soothed her in a second by a touch of ardor, a hint of pleading; but he only argued a little in grave, reasonable fashion, and asked her if she would not better reconsider her answer. She quivered under her anger, and the knowledge that it was small and petty doubled the exasperation. Her "No!" stood for what, in a lower civilization, would have been a blow.

They sat silent for a little while, she with an inward tumult that showed itself in proud rigidity, he outwardly impassive, though the mocking look had left his face.

"Well, I have failed," he began slowly. "Perhaps it was my fault, perhaps yours; or it may be that the thing itself is impossible."

Babette did not betray a flicker of interest, but he went on:

"I think I could have made you fall in love with my love of you, but I vowed I wouldn't. I wanted you to care for me myself, as a man, or not at all. I wanted you to like me first and then love me—but I seem to have failed in both."

She started to speak, then checked herself, and began working a nervous finger into a tiny hole in the silk pillow she leaned on.

"I'm not a man who spends his life on his knees, ministering to a woman's love of admiration. If I had won you in that attitude, you would have been unhappy when I went back to my normal position. You would have resented the posture, not the man himself. I wanted our relation to be an equal one from the start. I thought you were broad enough to appreciate it. Sincerity is a higher commodity than adoration, Babette."

"You don't love me—not in the least," she broke out. "You're cold and critical, and—oh I—" She stopped abruptly.

"Yes, you hate me," he said, a little bitterly. "If it were for what I am, I shouldn't have a word to say. But it is just for my attitude towards you—that is all you think of. This everlasting feminine vanity!"

Babette's self control was in tatters, but she drew it desperately around her. His face changed as he looked at her, and he came and stood beside her chair.

"My dearest girl, I know I've hurt you brutally a thousand times," he said; "but you have hurt me more. I did want you to understand the real value of things, to prove yourself

above the little personal standpoint that most girls take. And yet, all the time—he bent down till his forehead almost touched her hair—"I wanted to go down on my knees like any other fool!"

Something happened on the top of her head, but she had not time to realize what it was before the door closed and she was alone.

Babette's spirit crawled into its hole and lay there for many days bruised and bleeding. When the wounds began to heal, she felt as if years had passed over her.

"Oh, for the good old days, when women were not expected to be anything but little toy angels!" she said, with a long sigh, as she crept out into the world once more.

It was nearly two years before Babette saw Gray again. Change and chance took him completely away from her outer life. Then, one night, she found herself trembling with the knowledge that she was not two feet from him, in the crowded audience of an amateur play. He was directly in

front of her, sitting with his elbow on the back of his chair and talking to Mrs. Collier, a pretty, affected, little widow, delicately feminine.

"It's just my gown," she was saying. "Isn't it a triumph? Why, if you saw it on a wax lady in a shop window, your pulse would act in exactly the same way."

"But you didn't have it on last night," he argued. The chairs were so close together that Babette could hear every word. "Nor the night before, nor every time I've seen you. Besides, I never have time to look at your gowns. You send me away before I'm half through with your—"

"The curtain is going up," interposed Mrs. Collier.

"Do I have to look at the stage?" he asked, in a forlorn whisper.

Babette, under pretense of a draft, changed her seat, and fixed her eyes on the stage, dimly conscious that something was going on there. When, later, Gray recognized her and came across to shake hands, she met him with frank cordiality.

"It is good of you to speak to me at all," he said, dropping down beside her.

Her eyes questioned him.

"Surely you haven't forgotten how I took it on myself to read you a lecture, back in our buried pasts?" he explained. "I wake up and blush over it in the night even yet. I was very rude and very priggish, I remember. What a solemn chump you must have thought me!"

"It was about being broad-minded," said Babette, slowly; "about seeing things as they really were, and not just as they affected one personally."

"I'm afraid so," he admitted. "I made war on women in general and you in particular, and wanted you to give up your most adorable traits. Wasn't I green?"

"What if I had taken you seriously, had gone to work and made myself over to fit your standards?" she asked, with a laugh.

"Then I suppose I'd have been to blame for the spoiling of a very charming person," he answered. "I'm so glad you didn't. It's your blessed little femininities that make you what you are."

"What are we?" Her voice was heavy with something he did not try to understand.

"A thing to be braided and jeweled and kissed," he laughed. "The one redeeming feature of an ugly, stupid world."

"What has changed you so?" she asked. Her face was smiling, but she kept her eyes from him.

"Oh, time, and common sense, and experience, I suppose, and—" His voice had grown absent. Babette looked up in time to see Mrs. Collier fling a little smile at him across the room.

"Well, I'll see you again," said Gray, rising. "It's good of you to have forgiven me."

"I don't know that I have," said Babette, still smiling.

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